

**SPEECH BY H E TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD
AT THE BREAKTHROUGH LEADERSHIP EXCELLENCE IN A DYNAMIC WORLD
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MINDSET CHANGE: LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD

HH General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan,
Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi;

Your excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to say thank you to the Abu Dhabi police general headquarters for this invitation to speak on the mindset of leaders and the leadership which determines performance. Many factors of course affect performance, but leadership and the mind of the leader are among the most crucial.

Throughout the centuries we have seen some countries succeed, some remaining quite static and some fail. The strange thing is that among countries peopled by the same ethnic groups, some would succeed and some would fail.

Then we would notice that some countries do well some time and then fail at other times, while others which were backward would suddenly bloom and prosper. If we want to benefit from their experiences, their ups and downs, we need to know why, why they succeeded and why they failed. Then we can adopt the factors which contribute to success and avoid those leading to failure.

The Jahilliah Arabs upon embracing Islam developed and prospered and went on to build the great Islamic civilization. At the time when the Muslim Ummah were dominant and advanced in all fields the Europeans were wallowing in their dark ages. They were superstitious and backward and lived in absolute squalor. Their laws were primitive and unjust. Their kings were despotic and given to abuses of power. Their people nothing more than serfs cultivating land for their lords and masters.

Then around the 15th century of the Christian era the Muslims began to decline. Their empire began to crumble. The process was continuous so that today the Muslims are backward and are totally dependent on the developed countries of Europe and East Asia for their needs. Even the defence of the Ummah, their Quranic duty, depends on the weapons which they have to procure from those not of their faith, frequently their detractors. Their weakness has led to their being oppressed and humiliated, their religion dishonoured, disparaged and treated with contempt.

On the other hand the backward Europeans of the dark ages achieved their renaissance at about the time the Muslim Civilisation was collapsing and they, the ethnic European began to prosper, to be strong militarily and to establish the European empires which included conquered Muslim land. Such is their strength and wealth that they can now treat Muslim countries with contempt.

Why did this happen? Why did the early Muslims progress and then decline while the primitive Europeans achieve strength, wealth and power. The people involved were physically the same as they were before. The Europeans and the Arabs were the same people they were before yet their achievements were different during different ages. What happened?

The conclusion must be that somehow they had changed. Since the change was not physical then it must be mental, it must be their psyche, their character, their sets of values and the culture – the sum total of their values which influences their behaviour. It must be their value system change which adversely affected their performance, causing them to fail and decline.

If we care to examine the metamorphosis of the Jahilliah Arabs following their acceptances of Islam we must know that their value system changed radically with their new set of beliefs. Physically they were still the same people. But Islam had changed their cultural values. They had not only been motivated by Islam but their new religion changed their whole behaviour. They gave up their tribal feuds and cruel beliefs and united to become a very dynamic people, able to plan and act, to organise themselves, acquire all kinds of knowledge and with this organisation and knowledge to spread the message of Islam far and wide and to build the Islamic civilisation.

When the Islamic civilisation declined in the 15 century Christian era it was preceded by a reversal in the Muslim's value system and culture. From people who acquired and pioneered all kinds of knowledge and were inventive and skilled in the manufacture of complex products, their new values caused them to reject knowledge which they classified as un-Islamic. Science, Mathematics, Medicine etc were no longer studied. They became engrossed in polemics on religion and their different interpretations of Islam resulted in fragmenting the Muslims into numerous groups which were divided and opposed to each other and consequently they became disunited and weak.

At that same time the Europeans changed their values and culture. Seeing the progress and power of the Muslims who had conquered their lands they decided to study the knowledge accumulated by the Arabs and to adopt new sets of values. From then on they aggressively promoted the new values and consequently they prospered achieving their renaissance, becoming wealthy and strong. Their knowledge of Science, Mathematics and Medicine was constantly added to and upgraded so that they went from strength to strength. Today the ethnic Europeans are so far ahead that it seems impossible for Muslims to catch up with them.

What has this discussion about values to do with leadership in a changing era? The answer is everything. How a people handle the changes taking place around them depends on their culture, their value system. They may ignore the changes, they may adjust to them or they may seize the opportunity found in these changes. Depending on how they handle changes they will benefit or lose. And how they handle changes depends on their culture, their value systems.

Looking at the Muslim world today we have to acknowledge that we have not handled the changes happening around us well. The world has become smaller due to tremendous improvements in communication. No country or people can isolate themselves and live their own lives. Borders can no longer provide protection. Outside forces tend to impose themselves on every country and everyone. And some of these

outside forces are destructive. Whatever, if no adjustments are made, there is every possibility that we will perish, that what we believe in would be made irrelevant and obliterated, not overnight but with the passing decades and centuries. If this happens we have only ourselves to blame. It is because we have not made the right adjustments. And that can be because we don't have the right culture, the right value system which enables us to recognise the change and to respond to it correctly.

To survive we have to change our values. If we believe it was Islam which caused the Jahilliah Arabs to change and prosper, then we have to revert to Islam to find the values which had enabled the ignorant Arabs to build the great Muslim civilisation. And here we have to remind ourselves that it was Islam and not somebody's interpretation of it that changed and motivated the jahilliah.

We hear of the desire of Muslims to redeem their honour and the honour of Islam, to stop the humiliation that they suffer from. If we believe that our decline was and is due to our discarding the original Islamic values which had changed the Jahilliah Arabs, then if we want to redeem ourselves we must retrieve the good values which the Islam of the prophet promoted.

Can we do this? The simple answer is that we can if we want to. In terms of resources and wealth we have plenty. And we are endowed by Allah with the same mental capacity that others have. All we have to do is to acknowledge that some of the values we believe in are wrong and to discard them. We can then deliberately cultivate the good Islamic values compatible with achieving success. Then all the assets we have, our mental capacity, our resources etc. Can be harnessed positively and productively.

Muslim countries are said to be poorly governed. That is one reason why, despite their wealth, they are still unable to become developed. There are some who say only a popularly elected government can provide good government. This is not necessarily so. We are seeing a popularly elected government drag the country and its people into a costly and disastrous war from which it cannot get out. Of course an unelected government could do as much damage. Systems may facilitate but they guarantee nothing. Right values are more capable of delivering the desired results.

Bearing this in mind a government that wishes to continue governing and to develop the country must first show that it cares and is concerned with the well-being of the country and the people. This must be understood not just by the rulers but also by those manning the machinery of government and indeed the people. In other words the culture of the people must be right.

What is the right culture? Today we talk of the rule of law, for example. It is absolutely important that this must be upheld. But the laws must promote justice. Repeatedly the Quran stresses that when we judge we must judge with justice. But most of us are more concerned with the process and the punishments prescribed by the Muslim jurists. because of this the result may be injustice. When laws seems to be unjust then it is difficult to obey the rule of law. We need to ensure that our laws will result in justice. That is what Islam enjoined upon us repeatedly in the Quran. When ye judge, judge with justice.

Then there is the organisation of government. Whether popular or despotic, the organisation must enable the task of governing to be effective. There must be a line of command and specification of responsibilities

In the history of Malaysia the numerically superior army of the sultan of Malacca lost to a small Portuguese force in 1511. The reason is that the forces of the sultan were badly organised and had no proper line of command. The Portuguese were very well organised so that orders given by the highest officer could be passed down to the lower ranks to be carried out. Better coordinated, the Portuguese force was better able to take advantage of the disarray and confusion in the ranks of the Malay army.

Governments need good organisation to govern effectively. There must be a line of command and those receiving the command must be prepared to obey and know how to carry out the orders. But in some governments, those responsible for carrying out the orders may fail to do so for a variety of reasons. They may dispute the orders. They may just lack discipline. They may not know how to carry out the orders.

But whatever may be the reason, failure on the part of the subordinates to carry out orders, instructions or policies will result in the failure of governments. Such failures will cause instability and instability will prevent the development of the country.

But supposing the subordinates are blindly loyal and would do anything they are ordered to do. This is good only if those giving the orders give the right orders which will cause the country to progress and the people to benefit from the policies of government. But supposing the government disregards the interest of the people and the subordinates allow themselves to be used to suppress and oppress the people, then there would be growing resentment against the government which may in the end bring about protests and demonstrations or worse. Again the country would not be able to be stable and to develop.

Clearly the relations between those authorised to give orders and those expected to carry out the orders are not so cut and dried. It is not like the English saying which was the creed of their imperial forces in the past: "Ours is not to reason why Ours is to do and die". This British or ethnic European creed had resulted in the genocide of millions of red Indians and other Amerindians as well as other native inhabitants as the Europeans seized their land.

For the government to expect the apparatus of government to carry out orders, the orders must be good for the country as a whole. The subordinates must also accept that their first duty is to carry out orders. If every order is disputed then obviously nothing can be accomplished by government. But by and large the subordinates must assume that the decisions of the government are good until they are obviously very bad.

Under normal circumstances the people who enforce the law and the orders must be disciplined and be prepared to take and carry out orders. This is crucial if law and order are to prevail in a country. We have seen some countries where the men with the guns are fond of seizing power because they feel the civilian government was not doing the right thing. This is very dangerous. When power is seized by the guns then the rule of such men must also be by the guns. Invariably such rule will lead to abuses of power and the men with the guns will find it difficult to give up power. It is important to remember the dictum that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword. When the

men with the guns seized power, they will lose power in the same way. There will never be stability and development.

In Malaysia the government is elected and is made up of ordinary common people. They have nothing to sustain their position of authority except that the constitutional laws of the country confers on them the right to rule. They must abide by these laws if they wish to get the civil administration, the police and the armed forces to abide by the constitution and take orders from them. If they ignore the laws then the administrators and others would also ignore the laws. Then the machinery of government would collapse.

What has enabled Malaysia to remain stable, peaceful and capable of developing is the acceptance by the permanent civil administrative machinery, the police and the military that they must take orders from the elected government. Strictly speaking the elected government is physically powerless to enforce its decision. It has no palace guards or any special force bound to it through privileges or kinship. The military and the security forces can seize power and overthrow the elected government. But because everyone respects the law this has not happened. It is the mindset which ensures the laws are upheld by everyone.

But the men with guns also know that seizure of power by them would destabilise the country and end its stability and the rule of law. It would never be able to develop. There would always be tension as the coup leaders themselves, as individuals, would not retain the loyalty and support of the men under them for long. This is because their men would know that the coup leaders have no legitimacy and really have no physical means to force their men to remain loyal to them. There could be a revolt and even civil war. In the end those who seize power against the laws of the country would be overthrown, perhaps by others also with the use of force. And this could be repeated again and again, destabilising the country and preventing it from being well governed and developing. For all these reasons the constitution is upheld by everyone, the elected government as well as those who man the apparatus of government. And so democracy works in Malaysia.

It is this acceptance, this frame of mind, this mindset, this cultural values which has enabled physically weak people to command the loyalty of the men with the guns. The armed men know their places in the scheme of things and they know that in the long run they stand to benefit and the whole country stand to benefit by their acceptance and obedience to the civilians who rule the country.

Of course the elected government must reciprocate by governing well, by not being corrupt, by putting the interest of the nation above personal or family interests. If the elected government abuses its power, the law provides for a peaceful change of government through the ballot box. Only if the process of change of government is frustrated through unlawful means by the government will the structure collapse. This may invite intervention by the men with the guns. Therefore it is necessary that a civilian government must always be conscious of the need not to abuse power.

The balance is delicate. On the one hand the machinery of government must be prepared to accept the authority of the civilian government whether elected or not but on the other hand the government must not abuse the powers conferred on it.

This delicate balance can only be sustained if the people as a whole have the right set of values and understand the need for self-discipline. No one, neither those in power nor those over whom the power is exercised, must allow themselves to be influenced by greed or selfishness. Everyone must place the common good, the interest of the nation above immediate personal gains. In the process there will be good government and everyone will benefit.

Countries where the correct values are understood, appreciated and practiced by all the citizens, will be well-governed, stable and able to develop. In the end it is the good culture of the people that determines the well being of the people and the country. Knowing this, it is incumbent upon everyone to understand and cultivate the values which shape the mindset suitable for the successful governance of a country.

In most societies the value systems are imbibed by the members or inculcated informally from early age. Parents play the biggest role, followed by teachers. The rest is learnt in the course of mixing with other members of the society. Religion plays a big role in shaping the value system. However it is important to remember that usually it is the particular interpretation of the religion accepted by the society and not the religion itself which determines the culture, the value system and the mindset.

For this reason Muslim countries, although generally backward, differ from each other. Some are inclined to be violent while others are docile. Some seem incapable of having effective governments whether democratic or otherwise.

Because the value system is so important in determining the stability of a country, good governance and development, instilling it among the citizens cannot be left to the informal traditional way only. The value system must be carefully thought out by learned and experienced people and inculcated deliberately so as to ensure that the values are compatible with good governance which can result in stability and development for the country.

In South Korea and in Malaysia senior officials from the public and private sectors attend work camps where lectures were given on what constitute good values and how they play a role in effective management in both sectors. There is no doubt that these countries have benefited and have been able to make considerable progress in terms of stability and development.

Mindsets, value systems, culture, determine the individual's, the society's, the nation's performance. All these can be learnt and inculcated informally or formally. It remains for those entrusted to make decisions, the leaders, to decide to promote the right mindset, value system or culture. If we do this then InshaAllah, even the poorest of us can succeed in life and our countries can be stable, can develop and prosper.

Thank you.